

CROSSOVERS: AFRICAN AMERICANS AND GERMANY

Conference at the University of Münster, March 22-26, 2006. Co-sponsored by the GHI, the Collegium for African American Research (CAAR), the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), Seton Hall University, the University of Münster, and the United States Embassy, Berlin. Conveners: Maria I. Diedrich (University of Münster), Larry Greene (Seton Hall University), Jürgen Heinrichs (Seton Hall University), Anke Ortlepp (GHI).

Participants: Over 100 junior and senior scholars from all over Europe and the United States, with 104 scholars giving plenary lectures or delivering papers in one of the 15 workshops.

This conference was an attempt to translate the paradigms of the black diaspora and the black Atlantic into the German context. It sought to reconstruct the interaction of African Americans and Germans since the eighteenth century and to provide a continuous narrative of this encounter from the 1870s to the present. The discussions also focused on the need to develop methodological and theoretical paradigms—from post-colonial theory, whiteness studies, diaspora studies, ethnic studies, African American studies, to German studies and beyond—that will permit research in this new field of investigation. The conference brought together senior scholars of various disciplines who have already made contributions in the realm of interaction between African Americans and Germans, and junior scholars whose research projects focus on this area.

One of the most pressing issues brought to light by the conference through the critical reflections on the available studies on African American-German interaction was that of Eurocentric readings: the encounter tends to be represented as a transformational and liberating process for the African American protagonists, while the transformational processes to which the German context was submitted, either played a marginal role or was not raised at all. This illustrates the degree to which racialized and hierarchical discourses and modes of interpretation have been internalized, even by contemporary researchers on both sides of the Atlantic. Central to our discussion was therefore the negotiation of heuristic methodologies that will hopefully contribute to a deeper understanding of the trans-cultural dialogues and passages that characterize the interaction under investigation.

The conference revealed yet another research void: Research to this day focuses almost exclusively on twentieth-century encounters, with isolated excursions into the nineteenth century. The earliest encounters—for example, relations between Hessian troops in North America and African Americans during the War of Independence, recruitment of African Americans into the Hessian army, and the fate of African Americans who accompanied the Hessian troops when they returned to Hesse—have not been studied at all.

The conference also confirmed the need to coordinate the many, often isolated and fragmented research efforts in the field. A few examples from various historical and disciplinary contexts must suffice to represent the research themes and questions that were debated and which clearly require additional research and the definition of new theoretical paradigms:

- The slave trade was not an American phenomenon, just as anti-black racism is not. Although Germany was never a major participant in the slave trade, the churches, the Hanse, and German business people invested heavily in the trade and in products produced by slave labor like sugar and cotton, and they made huge profits. What was the impact of these investments on the German economy, on German society, on German philosophy, on German culture, on German folklore, on German perceptions of Africans and African Americans, and on the German definition of self and nationhood?
- African American travelers from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, almost with one voice, represent the German encounter as liberating (Du Bois: “I sit with Shakespeare, and he winces not.”) German researchers as well as the German public neither contextualized these representations nor reflected on their strategic intentions or their political intentions, for this is what Germans wanted to hear in their efforts to deal with their own racial past and present. The conference re-read these statements not only against specific expressions of racism in Germany but as strategic rhetoric formulae within the context of American racism. How was the African American visitor or the African American experience perceived in Germany in various historical contexts? What is the relationship between German representation of African Americans and African American self-representation? Are these encounters perceived as part of national history in Germany or as part of the African American experience in the United States?

- What was the relation between the German colonial experience and its racialized discourse, the “Horror on the Rhine” campaign of the early 1920s and the perception and representation of African American GIs and their children in post-World War II Germany?
- How do African Americans relate to the German “Sonderweg” (Herero, “Rhineland bastards,” black children of GIs)? In what ways does the African American experience reflect on the German race discourse and on German race policies?
- What was the impact of American segregation practices, especially in the army, on German perceptions of the United States, African Americans, and notions of race? What was the effect of these practices on German negotiations of their racial policy under Hitler? What was the impact of the American model on German negotiations of national identity after 1945?
- What happens to African American cultural products (jazz, rap, literature) when they begin to circulate in Germany? How do we identify the impact of this German adaptation and transformation of African American cultural products on cultural productions in the United States?
- Members of the German peace movement as well as contemporary German politicians were politicized not only by the Vietnam War but, equally important, by the civil rights movement and black nationalism. How do we identify and define these negotiations between the African American experience and the German political agenda? How did political ideas travel, and how and why were they transformed or adapted in a new political context? Is there an awareness of this influence among the German protagonists?
- How do we register the impact of the African American experience, and especially of African American visitors, on negotiations of Germanness and black diasporic identity among black Germans or blacks in Germany? What is the impact of this African American-German encounter on the ways contemporary Germany responds to African migration into Germany and to this new generation and quality of black Germans? How does the existence of these black Germans—whether of African or African American lineage—currently shape negotiations of German nationhood and of Germanness, as well as the German discourse on race and race relations?
- The internalization of anti-racist norms and rhetoric has produced new and sophisticated strategies of racialization. The analysis of anti-black racism in contemporary Germany cannot be restricted to right-wing extremism but has to be identified as attitudes reproduced through everyday interaction in popular disposition toward

the "Other-from-Within/Without" (Michelle Wright). How can the African American experience assist us in deciphering the diversified racialized discourses we encounter in contemporary Germany?

The conference program combined plenary lectures with workshop sessions. Plenary lectures were delivered by the following individuals: Tina M. Campt, Duke University ("Capturing the Black German Subject: Race and Gender in the Visual Archive"); Sabine Broeck, University of Bremen ("The Erotics of African American Endurance, or: On the Right Side of History? White (West) German Public Sentiment between Pornotroping and Civil Rights Solidarity"); Heide Fehrenbach, Northern Illinois University ("Afro-German Children and the Social Politics of Race after 1945"); Jürgen Heinrichs, Seton Hall University ("Memory and Identity in the Art of Marc Brandenburg"); Maria Höhn, Vassar College ("German and American Debates on Interracial Marriage, 1945-1968"); Clarence Lusane, American University ("Shared Sympathies: German and U.S. Anti-Black Discourses During the Nazi Era"); Christopher Mulvey, King Alfred's College, Winchester ("The Clotel Project"); and Berndt Ostendorf, University of Munich ("Forschungsreise in die Dämmerung: A German Africanist at Howard University, 1937-1939").

Workshops dealt with "Interactions in Academia," "Negotiating Germanness: Historical Perspectives," "African American Cultural Ambassadors to Germany," "Nazi Jim Crow," "African American/ Austro-German Collaboration," "Negotiating Germanness: Contemporary Perspectives," "African American Women and Germany," "African American Protest Identities in Germany of the 1960s and 1970s," "Reclaiming Black Experiences during the Nazi Period as a Foundation for Dialogue and Transformation," "Black European Studies in the Twenty-First Century," "Negotiating Slavery and Race," "Harlem and Weimar," "African America and the GDR/USSR," "Blackness in German Literature," "Denmark and the Black Atlantic," and "Race, Identity and Representation in Material Culture Across the Atlantic."

The academic program was accompanied by several cultural events related to the conference theme. "Reading and Performing the African American Experience in Germany: An Evening Dedicated to John A. Williams" featured readings by the poet and scholar Melba Boyd (Wayne State University), the dramatist, novelist, and scholar Andrea Hairston (Smith College), the black German autobiographer and scholar Ika Hügel-Marshall (Alice-Salomon-Fachhochschule Berlin) and the Tuskegee airman and former POW Alexander Jefferson from Detroit. These readings were interspersed by readings from John A. Williams's novel about an African American jazz musician in Dachau, *Clifford's Blues*

(1999). On another evening, Yvonne Poser (Howard University) screened a series of films dealing with African American-German interactions. Throughout the conference, the photo exhibition "Paul Robeson" was on display, presented by Christine Naumann from the Robeson Archive Berlin.

The conference was designed as a brain-storming point of departure for the larger research project "Crossovers: African Americans and Germany." A follow-up event will take place next year.

Anke Ortlepp, Maria Diedrich, Larry Greene, Jürgen Heinrichs